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FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Microwave Furor

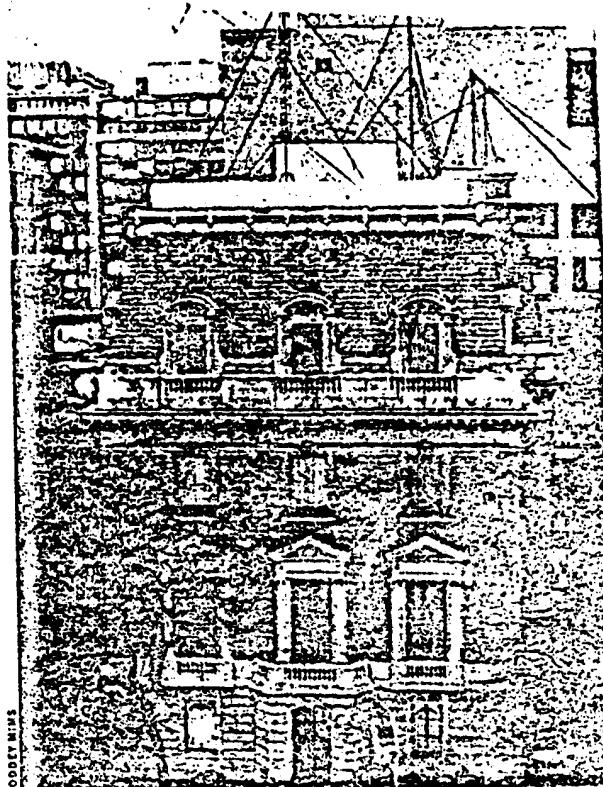
"Why not go public and embarrass them for a change?" demanded an irate former Moscow diplomat last week. He was referring to Washington's curious reticence about the great Moscow microwave furor. Last month the U.S. confirmed that for some 15 years the Soviet Union has been beaming microwaves at the hulking nine-story U.S. embassy on Moscow's Tchaikovsky Street (TIME, Feb. 23). The purpose: to jam the sophisticated electronic monitoring devices inside and on the roof of the building. (An earlier theory, now taken less seriously, was that the microwaves were designed to activate or charge up Soviet bugs planted within the embassy.) The U.S. has also confirmed that last May the microwave dosage suddenly increased sharply.

Gamma Guppy. Last week there were reports that the Government has worked out a mild compromise with Moscow. According to these accounts, the Soviets have decreased the microwave bombardment to pre-May levels—but they have not halted it, as the Government is still demanding. In exchange, the U.S. has removed some equipment from the embassy. Among other things, U.S. surveillance gear has allegedly been used for a project called Gamma Guppy that has tried to eavesdrop on conversations conducted by members of the Soviet Politburo in their limousines. The State Department refused to comment on the compromise, but officials said wire-mesh guards ("mosquito screens" that deflect 90% of the microwaves) have been installed across embassy windows.

Why is Washington being so close-mouthed about the affair? "Maybe we're doing the same thing back in triple spades," suggested a former Moscow resident. Another theory is that Kissinger has soft-pedaled the issue for fear of further damaging détente.

In any case, TIME has learned that the State Department last week decided to launch a full-scale medical investigation of the thousands of U.S. diplomats and their families who served in Moscow since the early 1960s. In the wake of the microwave disclosures, former embassy employees and their families have recalled suffering strange ailments during their tenure in Moscow, ranging from eye ties and headaches to heavy menstrual flows. Some point out that former Ambassadors to Moscow Charles Bohlen and Llewellyn Thompson both died of cancer, within the last two years one other Moscow diplomat died of cancer, and five women who lived there have undergone cancer-related mastectomies—although no medical authorities attribute these deaths and illnesses to radiation.

Only in recent weeks has Ambassador Walter Stoessel (who is said to be



SOVIET EMBASSY IN WASHINGTON

A curious, continuing reticence.

suffering from anemia and eye hemorrhaging) been briefing embassy staffers on the situation. Rumors that the waves can cause leukemia, sterility in males or birth defects are circulating around the embassy. But morale remains good, nobody has yet requested a transfer, and some employees even manage weak jokes about the affair ("You're looking radiant today, dear"). "No one's mad at Stoessel," explains one diplomat in Moscow. "The resentment is directed against top management in Washington for not leveling with us."

No Link. How much danger do the waves present? "All we've been told," one employee in the Moscow embassy noted wryly, "is that the waves might cause slight insomnia and irritability. What difference would that make in Moscow? We're all irritable insomniacs anyway." In fact, U.S. Government studies say there could be harmful effects from microwave exposure due to their "cooking" of human cells. But no link to cancer has been demonstrated.

Back home, the Democrats have not made a campaign issue of the affair—so far. But cold-warring Scoop Jackson will probably speak out sharply if the waves are not completely switched off pretty soon. Meanwhile, some former employees are considering legal action. One tactic may be to sue the department for more details, under the Freedom of Information Act. Anxieties about long-range effects of microwave exposure persist. Said one angry former Moscow resident: "One of the things I'm not going to give up my life for is intercepting the conversations of Leonid Brezhnev in his limousine."